PATTERNS OF POWER · THE CONQUEROR'S GRANDCHILDREN

THE CONQUEROR'S GRANDCHILDREN

Why some ruling elites keep their own formation, and others are absorbed by the people they rule

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with Claude (Anthropic) · 2026

held as tested, not revealed

Held as tested, not revealed.

A case study in the Patterns of Power series.
Primary sources quoted exactly; modern scholarship paraphrased and credited.
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ONE

Two Boys and a Language

The problem in its smallest form — a Norman heir sent away to learn his grandfather's tongue, and a Greek queen who was the first of her line in nearly three centuries to speak the language of her own kingdom

Some time in the late 930s, a warlord in northern France called William Longsword took his young son Richard and sent him away to be raised at Bayeux, in the north-west of the territory he ruled. William's father Rollo had been a Viking, a Norse raider who a generation earlier had been granted land around Rouen by the Frankish king on condition that he stop raiding and accept baptism. The reason William sent his heir away is not recorded by anyone we can fully trust — our source is a court panegyrist — but the circumstance is clear enough. Rouen had already gone French. Bayeux was where Norse was still spoken. The grandson of a Viking had to be exported to the provinces to learn his grandfather's language.

Nine hundred years earlier and two thousand miles away, a Macedonian general named Ptolemy had made himself ruler of Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great. His descendants held it for very nearly three centuries. According to the Greek biographer Plutarch, the last of them — Cleopatra VII, who died in 30 BC — was the first member of the dynasty to learn the Egyptian language. Every one of her ancestors had governed a country of some four or five million Egyptians through interpreters, for two hundred and seventy-five years.

Two conquering elites. Both small minorities sitting on top of much larger conquered populations. One dissolved into its subjects inside a single generation. The other was still linguistically foreign after a quarter of a millennium.

This paper is about what makes the difference. The short answer is that it has almost nothing to do with the strength or antiquity of the conqueror's culture, and almost everything to do with a set of arrangements — some deliberate, most not — governing who physically holds the conqueror's children while those children are small. The longer answer requires first explaining what is actually being transmitted, because the ordinary vocabulary for this ("culture", "assimilation", "identity") obscures the mechanism rather than naming it.

TWO

What Formation Is

The thing being transmitted is not a set of beliefs but a distribution of trust, and it is installed before the person is capable of assessing it

Start with a fact about human knowledge that is easy to state and hard to keep in view: essentially nothing any of us believes has been checked by us.

You believe the earth is roughly four and a half billion years old, that a particular continent exists, that a medicine works, that a battle happened, that your body contains organs of certain shapes. You have verified none of it. You could in principle verify a little, at enormous cost, and you never will. What you have done instead — what everyone does, all day, without noticing — is defer. You accept claims from sources you take to be reliable, and you reject claims from sources you take not to be.

This is not a defect. A species that had to verify everything first-hand would know almost nothing, because the great advantage of being human is precisely that we can inherit what other people learned without repeating their experiments or their mistakes. Deference is the mechanism that makes cumulative knowledge possible. But it creates a standing question that every person must answer every day, thousands of times, mostly below the level of conscious thought: **whom do I believe?**

Nobody answers that question from scratch. Nor are people simply gullible — a substantial body of work in cognitive science, running from Dan Sperber and colleagues' account of "epistemic vigilance" through the developmental work of Paul Harris and Melissa Koenig on children's selective trust, shows that people of all ages are quite discriminating about sources. Even three- and four-year-olds track who has been right before and prefer informants who have been accurate. Adults are harder still to move: try arguing a grown person out of a settled political or religious conviction and observe how well the defences hold.

What people do instead is run on **cues**. Not "is this claim true?", which is usually unanswerable in the moment, but "does this source bear the marks of one that should be trusted?" The marks are things like apparent competence, confidence, consensus among others, prestige and standing in the community, and — the deepest of them — whether the source belongs to one's own group. Anthropologists and evolutionary theorists such as Robert Boyd, Peter Richerson and Joseph Henrich have shown how much of human learning is *prestige-biased*: we preferentially copy those the community

treats as successful, which is an excellent strategy for acquiring skills you cannot evaluate directly.

Now the crucial point. **Which cues count, and which people bear them, is settled in childhood.** By the time vigilance is fully operational — by the time a person is capable of scrutinising an argument, weighing evidence and refusing a claim — the standards by which he does the scrutinising are already installed. They do not present themselves as a doctrine he was taught. They present themselves as the obvious facts of the world: these are the people who know things, that is what a serious man looks like, this is what matters, these are the commitments one does not bargain over.

Call this **formation**. It is not propaganda, which is aimed at adults and mostly fails. It is not education in the narrow sense, though schools are one of its instruments. It is the process by which a small child acquires the equipment he will later do his thinking *with*: the cast of the world, who the natural authorities are, which sources give a true account, what a good life looks like, and what lies outside calculation altogether.

Three consequences follow, and the rest of this paper depends on them.

First, there is no unformed person. Formation is not a service a state elects to provide. It happens to every child everywhere, by somebody. If a conquering power declines to form a population, that population does not become blank and available. It stays formed by whoever was already forming it — mothers, priests, elders, neighbours, the calendar of the year. The conqueror who refuses to form a people has not left a gap; he has left an incumbent in possession.

Second, this applies to aristocrats. There is a persistent assumption that ruling classes somehow transmit themselves — that being noble is a property of blood or family that carries forward automatically. It is not. A duke's son is a small child before he is a duke's son in any operative sense, and he acquires his picture of the world from whoever is in the room. If the people in the room are the conquered, the picture will be theirs.

Third, the transmission runs through specific, identifiable channels, and they can be counted. The mother and her language. The wet-nurse. Fostering or boarding arrangements. Tutors. Household servants. Playmates. Priests. The stories heard, the festivals kept, the games played, the food eaten, the songs. Each is a channel, each can in principle be controlled, and — as we shall see — at least one state in history sat down and enumerated them one by one in a statute.

THREE

The Obvious Answer, and Why It Fails

Strong cultures do not survive conquest; rebuilt institutions do

The intuitive hypothesis is that conquerors with a strong, old, prestigious, institutionalised culture keep it, and conquerors with a thin or unwritten one lose it. The Macedonians in Egypt had Homer, Athens, philosophy, drama and a literary language; they held out. Rollo's Vikings had an oral religion and no schools; they dissolved.

This is not quite wrong, but it fails on a case that ought to be decisive.

In 1169 and after, Anglo-Norman lords invaded Ireland under the authority of the king of England. They arrived carrying about as institutionalised a formation as medieval Europe could supply: Latin Christianity with its clergy and its calendar, the English common law, a literate administration, a chancery, a king, and a language of prestige. If a strong institutional culture were sufficient, they should have held.

Within two centuries a large part of the settler nobility had become, in the phrase that later attached to them, more Irish than the Irish themselves. They spoke Irish, took Irish names, wore Irish dress, rode in the Irish manner, used Irish law, married Irish wives, and fostered their children in Irish households. The area in which English law and custom actually ran had contracted to a handful of eastern counties.

So the variable is not *having* a strong formation. It is something else, and the Irish case and the Egyptian case together point at what.

FOUR

Egypt: The Machine Rebuilt

The Ptolemies did not rely on being Greek; they reconstructed the apparatus of Greekness on foreign soil and staffed it for three hundred years

When Alexander the Great died in 323 BC his generals divided his conquests. Ptolemy, one of the most senior, took Egypt, and in 305 BC declared himself king. His dynasty ruled until the Romans annexed the country in 30 BC.

The Ptolemies were a tiny minority. Recent demographic work — Rachel Mairs and others reassessing the papyrological and military evidence, notably in the volume *Demography in the Graeco-Roman World* — puts the total population of Ptolemaic Egypt at something like four million, with Greek settlers numbering on the order of one hundred and eighty thousand, and mass Greek immigration effectively ceasing by the middle of the third century BC. Call it four or five per cent of the population, and no reinforcement after the first two generations.

They did not remain Greek by inertia. They **built the machinery of Greekness in Egypt and paid for it continuously**, and the components are worth listing because each maps onto one of the transmission channels named above.

They founded and privileged Greek cities. Alexandria was a Greek *polis* on the Egyptian coast, with the Library and the Mouseion — an endowed research institution — at its centre; Ptolemais in the south was another; Naukratis was an older Greek foundation. Greek settlers lived in identifiable quarters. This is the *concentration* condition: it puts the conquerors physically among each other rather than among the conquered.

They installed the gymnasium. A Greek *gymnasion* was not merely a sports facility; it was the physical plant of Greek male formation — athletics, but also music, letters, festivals and the association of those entitled to attend. Gymnasia appear across Ptolemaic Egypt, in villages as well as cities, and the scholarship on them (there is a substantial Oxford study by Mario Paganini on gymnasia and Greek identity in Ptolemaic and early Roman Egypt) treats them as the key institution by which the settlers asserted and maintained the status of *Hellenes*. Membership of the gymnasium was, in effect, the certificate of being Greek.

They made Greek the language of power. Administration ran in Greek. Advancement required Greek. A native Egyptian *could* rise into the bureaucracy — the evidence shows Egyptians reaching high office over time — but, as the standard

reference summaries put it, in order to do so they had to Hellenize. This is important and will matter later: the door was open in one direction only.

They ran two legal systems. Greek courts (*chrematistai*, and earlier *dikastai*) and Egyptian courts (*laokritai*) operated side by side, with a royal decree of 118 BC still sorting out the boundary between them by reference to the language a contract was written in. A separate legal identity is a daily, practical reminder of which people one belongs to.

They tied land and military service to Greekness. Greek and Macedonian soldier-settlers held land as *cleruchs* with generous allotments and high status; native Egyptian soldiers, the *machimoi*, held small plots. Material advantage was attached to remaining what you were.

And at the top they closed the household absolutely. The Ptolemaic royal house practised consanguineous marriage — brothers marrying sisters — for generations. This is normally filed under dynastic eccentricity. Read functionally it is the most complete anti-absorption device available, because it closes the one channel no law can reach. You can legislate against fostering, tutors, servants and priests. You cannot legislate a foreign mother out of her own child's first three years. The Ptolemies solved that problem by not having foreign mothers.

The result was that after two hundred and seventy-five years the ruling house still needed interpreters to speak to its own subjects. That is not conservatism. It is capital expenditure, renewed annually, for three centuries.

And it had a price, which the next sections will make explicit: the Ptolemies never obtained the *conviction* of Egypt. They bought the Egyptian priesthood repeatedly by decree — the Rosetta Stone is one such decree, a priestly synod granting the king honours in exchange for concessions — they faced serious native revolts, and their order remained expensive to hold to the end.

FIVE

Normandy: One Generation

What happens when there is nothing to rebuild

In 911 the Frankish king Charles the Simple came to terms with a Viking leader whose name comes down to us as Rollo, granting him land around Rouen in exchange for defending the river and accepting Christianity. Rollo was baptised. His descendants ruled the territory that took its name from the Northmen: Normandy.

Now count the conditions.

Rollo's followers had no portable institutional formation to rebuild. Norse religion was oral, local and tied to places they had left. There was no Norse literate class, no Norse school, no Norse legal code that could be transplanted, no Norse clergy. What they had was a set of practices that made sense on ships and in Scandinavia.

They were few, and they married locally. Rollo's own consort Poppa was Frankish. His son William Longsword's consort Sprota was Breton. Within two generations the ruling line's mothers were all local women.

They had accepted the conquered population's religion as a condition of the grant — which meant that the priests, the calendar, the festivals, the rites of passage, and the moral vocabulary of the ruling family's children were Frankish and Christian from the start.

And there was no reinforcement. Immigration from Scandinavia was not sustained at a level that could have refreshed the language.

The result is the vignette this paper opened with. William Longsword, ruling a territory his father had taken by force a generation earlier, had to send his heir away to a provincial town to acquire the ancestral language, because the capital had already gone over. Within a further century and a half the descendants of these Norsemen had conquered England and Sicily, supplied a disproportionate share of the leadership of the First Crusade, and become — as the phrase goes — the model Christian warrior aristocracy of Latin Europe.

They lost everything that made them Norse, and they became far more formidable than they had been.

SIX

Ireland: The Statute as a Confession

A state enumerating the channels of formation one by one, because it had no machinery and only a legislature

The Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland began in 1169. By the middle of the fourteenth century the English crown had concluded that its own colonists were disappearing into the population they had been sent to rule.

In 1366 a parliament at Kilkenny, presided over by Lionel of Antwerp, Duke of Clarence and son of King Edward III, enacted a body of legislation — thirty-five acts, written in Norman French — known as the Statutes of Kilkenny. It is one of the most revealing documents in the history of colonial rule, and it is revealing because of what its authors thought they had to prohibit.

Read the provisions as a list of transmission channels and the document becomes a formation audit conducted by men watching one fail.

Marriage between English and Irish: forbidden, and made treason. *Fostering of children* with the Irish: forbidden, and made treason — and this is the sharpest clause in the statute, because Irish fosterage, the practice of having one's children raised in another household, was precisely the institution through which formation ran. *Adoption* of Irish children: forbidden. *Concubinage and amour*: forbidden. *Irish names*: the English must be named by an English name, leaving off entirely the Irish manner of naming. *The Irish language*: English colonists who did not know how to speak English were required to learn it on pain of forfeiting their lands. *Dress, and the manner of riding*: English custom and fashion required. *Irish law* — the native Brehon law — dismissed as bad custom, and its use by the English made treason. *The church*: no Irishman of the Irish nations to be admitted to any cathedral or collegiate church among the English. *Games*: hurling and quoits to be dropped in favour of archery and lancing. And, most telling of all, *Irish minstrels, pipers, storytellers, rhymers and harpers* forbidden to come among the English — the statute justifies this on the ground that they spy out English secrets, but the effect, and one suspects the real anxiety, is that they carry the stories.

Someone sat down and listed the ways a child becomes Irish, and made each of them a crime.

Now note two things about the document that matter more than its contents.

It came nearly two hundred years too late. The statutes open by acknowledging that the settlers have already been influenced by Irish custom. The area of effective English governance had already contracted to a handful of counties. And, as the historiography flatly records, the English never had the resources to fully implement them.

And legislation is what you reach for when you have no formative institutions. The Ptolemies did not need a statute forbidding Greeks to become Egyptian, because they had gymnasia, Greek courts, Greek cities and Greek marriages. A gymnasium does not need to be enforced by a sheriff; children attend it and come out Greek. The Statutes of Kilkenny are the confession of a state that had settlers in Ireland and its schools, its courts, its clergy and its marriage market back in England.

Prohibition is the instrument of a power that cannot form; provision is the instrument of one that can. When you find a state criminalising the channels of formation, you are looking at an authority that has already lost the ability to run them, and the statute is the receipt.

SEVEN

The Steppe: No Machine to Rebuild

The Mongol case, and the experiment it accidentally performed

In 1206 a chieftain named Temüjin united the tribes of the eastern grasslands and took the title Chinggis Khan. Within two generations his descendants ruled from Korea to the Danube.

The Mongols built essentially no formative apparatus. They had no scripture, no clergy of their own (a shaman who accumulated independent authority early on was killed), no schools, no published law code, and no writing system until they took one off a captured Uighur scribe in 1204. Their soldiers were formed for free, by their own households — children rode from the age of two or three, were given bows scaled to their size, herded, hunted and endured, and arrived at fighting age complete. It was the cheapest army in history and it required no state institution whatever. But a household formation of that kind works only on the terrain that produces it. It is not portable to a city.

They made no attempt to form anyone they conquered — no schools for Chinese or Persian children, no imposed creed, no conversion effort. They hired administrators already formed by the states they had destroyed: a Khitan aristocrat with a classical Chinese education, Khwarazmian Muslim financiers, Uighur scribes, Persian secretaries, and clergy of four religions kept on retainer and exempted from tax in exchange for praying for the dynasty.

And they were a very small number of people — perhaps seven hundred thousand on the grasslands at the founding, against a north Chinese population the Jin census of 1207 put at over fifty million — dispersed as a thin ruling stratum across an enormous area, marrying out as deliberate policy.

So their children were raised by the conquered's women, tutored by the conquered's scholars, attended by the conquered's clergy, in the conquered's cities, on the conquered's calendar.

What happened next is as close to a controlled experiment as history provides, because the same family, with the same law and the same founding, was set down among four different populations at the same time.

In Iran, the branch descended from Hülegü — who had sacked Baghdad and killed the Caliph in 1258 — produced, thirty-seven years later, a khan named Ghazan who

converted to Islam and made it the state religion, and who reformed the tax system in the vocabulary of Islamic government through Persian officials.

In China, the branch descended from Hülegü's own brother Qubilai — same mother, same tent, same upbringing — built a Chinese capital, took Chinese reign-titles, kept Confucian rites, patronised Tibetan Buddhism and commissioned a script from a Tibetan lama. No Islam.

On the Kipchak steppe, the branch descended from Jochi became Muslim and Turkic-speaking, in a process the scholarship calls Kipchakization.

And in Central Asia, the branch descended from Chagatai held territory that included *both* settled cities and open steppe — and it split along exactly that line. A khan named Tarmashirin, ruling from 1331, moved his court into the settled lands of Transoxiana, promoted agriculture and trade, was famous as far as Cairo for his devotion to Islamic law, and — according to Michal Biran's study of his reign — abolished the *yasa*, the customary law of Chinggis Khan. In 1334 the nomadic tribes of the eastern provinces rose and brought him down. The khanate divided into a Muslim, settled, Persianate west and a nomadic east that would not convert for another generation.

Two conclusions follow, and the second is the one that matters most for this paper.

The first is that **lineage did not govern the outcome**. Two branches of the same house, from one mother, went opposite ways; two branches of different houses converged. What sorted them was the country each sat in.

The second is a correction. The obvious formulation — that each branch adopted the framework of the population it *ruled* — is wrong, and the Golden Horde proves it. That branch's most numerous subject population was the Orthodox Christian peasantry of the Russian principalities, from whom it drew a large part of its revenue. It did not become Orthodox. It became Muslim, because the Russian lands were held at arm's length through their own princes, with a written patent and a tribute and hardly any Mongol physically present between collections, while the people the ruling group actually camped among, hired, married and had its children raised by were the Turkic and increasingly Muslim population of the steppe.

A conquering elite converges on the framework of the population it lives among, not the population it rules. Where those are the same people, the two formulations agree and nothing is learned. Where extraction runs at a distance through intermediaries while the elite camps somewhere else, the elite goes the way of the second population, every time.

And note how long it took. Everywhere in the Mongol case the divergence took roughly three generations, not one. That is the length of a formation cycle. It is not the length of a policy debate, because nobody was debating.

EIGHT

Peking: The Programme, Funded and Failing

A state that saw the problem coming, spent two centuries fighting it, and lost anyway

In 1644 the Manchus — a people from beyond the Great Wall numbering perhaps a million — conquered China, with a population then somewhere upward of a hundred million. They ruled it as the Qing dynasty until 1911.

They were the only conquering elite in this paper who understood the mechanism in advance and legislated against it early rather than late, and their programme is worth setting out because it is the most complete anti-absorption apparatus on record after the Ptolemies.

The conquerors were organised into the **Eight Banners**, hereditary military-administrative units in which membership was inherited and to which a distinct legal and economic status attached. Bannermen were quartered in segregated garrisons — walled Manchu quarters inside Chinese cities, physically separated from the population around them. They were barred from most civilian professions, restricted largely to soldiering and office. They had their own examination quotas and their own legal privileges. Intermarriage with the Han population was restricted.

And the court articulated the whole thing as a doctrine. The eighteenth-century slogan was *guoyu qishe* — "national language and mounted archery" — the Manchu Way, which Mark Elliott's *The Manchu Way* (2001) takes as its title and its subject. Manchu language competence and archery skill were made conditions of banner status and were tested. Emperors issued edicts about frugality, simplicity and the preservation of the old ways.

It failed anyway, slowly, in exactly the manner the mechanism predicts. Elliott's account of the eighteenth century describes bannermen sinking into debt, abandoning archery, and losing the Manchu language, with a documented preference for teahouses over the practice range; the recurrent revival policies generally did not work. By the late nineteenth century most bannermen could not speak Manchu, and the language survived chiefly as an archival and ceremonial medium. What did survive was a legal and political identity — Elliott's argument, against an older view that the Manchus were simply sinicized, is that a real distinctness persisted, but it persisted as *status* rather

than as a way of living. Pamela Crossley's parallel work stresses that Manchu identity was to a large extent a construction of the state.

The Qing case is instructive precisely because it is the best-resourced attempt in the paper and still eroded. It tells us that segregation, hereditary status, legal privilege, language requirements and imperial exhortation together are not sufficient — because what they mostly regulate is the adult, and the leakage happens in the household, through Chinese servants, Chinese nurses, Chinese playmates, Chinese wives where they were obtainable, and a Chinese city on the other side of the wall.

The Ptolemies did better on this dimension not because they were more determined but because they had built institutions that operated *on children* — the gymnasium above all — and because at the top they closed the maternal channel entirely.

NINE

Cairo: The Third Answer

A regime that solved absorption by refusing to transmit anything at all

There is a third strategy, and it is the most radical.

From 1250 to 1517 Egypt and Syria were ruled by the Mamluks. The word means "owned". The ruling class consisted of men who had been purchased as boys, from non-Muslim populations beyond the frontier — Kipchak Turks initially, Circassians later — brought to Cairo, converted, trained in barracks, manumitted, and advanced on merit and factional loyalty into the highest military and political offices in the state.

The decisive feature is what happened to their sons. The sons of Mamluks, called *awlad al-nas* — "sons of the people [who matter]" — were generally **excluded from the elite their fathers belonged to**. They could hold subordinate military positions, and many went into scholarship, administration or religious careers, but they were not members of the *mamluk* class, because they had not been imported, had not been slaves, and had not passed through the barracks. David Ayalon, whose work established the standard account, described the arrangement as a one-generation aristocracy, constantly renewed from outside.

This is not a solution to the absorption problem. It is a *dissolution* of it. The Mamluks did not try to transmit a formation across generations at all. They rebuilt the elite from scratch each generation out of freshly imported foreign boys, formed in a barracks the state controlled completely.

It worked, in the sense that the regime lasted two hundred and sixty-seven years, destroyed the Crusader states, and stopped the Mongols. It had two obvious costs. It required a continuous supply of purchasable foreign children, which made the regime dependent on slave markets and on political conditions in the Black Sea steppe. And it made the succession permanently unstable, because an elite with no hereditary principle has no agreed rule for who rules next — the historiography records repeated puppet sultans and factional coups.

The Ottoman *devşirme*, which levied Christian boys from the Balkans, converted them and formed them for the palace service and the janissary corps, is a variant of the same design, and it decayed in the characteristic way: once janissaries were permitted to marry and enrol their sons, the mechanism that had made them outsiders was gone.

Note what the Mamluk case proves. **Absorption is a problem of inheritance.** If the elite does not reproduce itself biologically, the household channel cannot betray it, because there is no household. Every other strategy in this paper is an attempt to defend a household. This one abolishes the household.

TEN

The Variable Stack

What actually predicts the outcome

Putting the cases together, six conditions govern whether a conquering elite holds its formation, and they are largely independent of one another.

One: numbers, and the ratio. Four or five per cent, concentrated, with institutions, can hold. A fraction of one per cent, dispersed, cannot. The Mongol ruling stratum in China was of the order of one in a hundred at best, spread over a subcontinent.

Two: concentration versus dispersion. Can the elite live physically among itself? The Ptolemies had Alexandria, Ptolemais and Greek quarters; the Qing had walled garrison cities; the English in Ireland had, eventually, only the Pale — a boundary drawn precisely to define where the separation still held. Dispersion is fatal because it puts each family alone among the conquered, and each family raises its own children.

Three: portability of the formative apparatus. Can the machinery be rebuilt on foreign ground? A gymnasium can. A cathedral school can. A Qur'anic *madrasa* can. A pastoral childhood on the open steppe cannot, because it requires the steppe. This is the sense in which the "strong culture" intuition is right after all — but the relevant strength is *institutional portability*, not antiquity or prestige.

Four: the marriage rule. Who are the mothers? This is the single most powerful variable, because the mother has the child in the years when nothing can be undone and no statute can reach. The Ptolemies took the extreme option and married their own sisters. Rollo's line married locally in the first generation and lost the language in the second. The Mongols married out as deliberate imperial policy, giving daughters to subject rulers and taking wives from conquered peoples.

Five: who else is in the household. Nurses, servants, tutors, fosterers, priests, playmates. This is where the Qing programme leaked despite everything else, and it is what the Statutes of Kilkenny were desperately trying to close.

Six: reinforcement. Is there continuing immigration from home, and continuing traffic back? Greek immigration to Egypt effectively ended by the mid-third century BC and the Ptolemies still held, which shows this is not decisive on its own — but the Normans in England provide the counter-case: after the loss of Normandy in 1204 cut the aristocracy's cross-Channel estates, the English nobility's drift into English was rapid.

Underneath all six is a single question, and every one of them is a proxy for it: **who physically holds the conqueror's children in the years before they can assess anything?**

ELEVEN

Three Strategies and What Each Costs

Seal, absorb, or refuse to inherit — and none of them is free

The cases sort into three designs.

Seal. Rebuild the formative machinery on conquered ground and close the household. Ptolemaic Egypt is the successful instance; Qing China is the well-funded partial failure; ancient Sparta, holding down a subject Messenian population with a state-run boys' training system and a closed citizen body, is a further variant.

The price is permanent expense. An elite that stays foreign never obtains the conviction of the ruled, so it must go on holding the country by force, surveillance and purchase indefinitely. The Ptolemies bought the Egyptian priesthood repeatedly by decree and faced serious native revolts; the Qing garrisons remained garrisons. **Sealing buys identity, and pays for it forever.**

Absorb. Let the household do what it does, and become the people you rule. Normandy, the Mongol successor states and Anglo-Ireland are the instances.

The price is the loss of everything that made you distinct — and the loss of the metropole's control, which is a different thing and matters enormously. **Absorbing buys cheap rule at the cost of the conqueror's identity and of his link to whoever sent him.**

Refuse to inherit. Do not transmit at all; re-import and re-form the elite every generation. The Mamluk sultanate is the instance, the Ottoman *devşirme* the variant.

The price is a permanent dependence on the external supply of children and a succession that has no rule and must be settled by force. **This design buys permanent freshness at the cost of permanent instability.**

None is obviously superior. Which is *available* is not a matter of will: it depends on the six conditions above, most of which a conqueror does not choose. He cannot choose how many of his people there are, whether the terrain permits concentration, or whether his own formation is the kind that can be packed and shipped. He can choose the marriage rule and the household staffing, which is why those are the two levers that show up as explicit policy in case after case — the Ptolemaic sister-marriage, the Kilkenny prohibitions, the Qing restrictions, the Mamluk barracks.

TWELVE

Who Actually Lost

Absorption is not decay, and the party that suffers is usually not the one that absorbed

The conventional telling treats absorption as a decline — the conquerors going soft, losing their vigour, being swallowed. That framing is almost exactly backwards, and correcting it is the most useful thing this paper has to offer.

Consider who came out well.

The Normans absorbed completely and became the most effective conquering machine in eleventh-century Europe: England in 1066, southern Italy and Sicily across the same decades, a leading role in the First Crusade. Whatever they lost, it did not cost them capability. It arguably supplied it, because a Christian, French-speaking, literate aristocracy could draw on the administrative and ecclesiastical resources of Latin Europe in a way a pagan Norse warband could not.

The Anglo-Irish lords who went native were not ruined. They became entrenched, locally legitimate magnates with real followings, secure in their lordships, related by marriage and fosterage to the families around them — in many cases more secure than they had been as an occupying garrison. Their descendants held land for centuries.

The Mongol successor states, once absorbed, ruled longer and more stably than the unified empire had. The Ilkhanate under a Muslim ruler could tax Iran through Iranian institutions; the Yuan could govern China through Chinese ones.

Meanwhile the elites that sealed themselves paid and went on paying. The Ptolemies never got Egypt's conviction and never stopped buying its priesthood. The Qing spent two centuries subsidising a hereditary caste whose military value declined throughout.

So who loses when a colonial elite absorbs?

The metropole. That is the whole content of the Statutes of Kilkenny. Read it again with this in mind: it is a legislature in Dublin, acting for a king in London, trying to prevent its own agents in Ireland from doing what was manifestly in their local interest. The settlers were not failing. They were succeeding — at being Irish lords, which was a better business than being English outposts. What was failing was the crown's ability to use them as instruments.

The general form is this. A conquering power installs an elite in a distant territory in order to hold it *for the metropole*. Formation runs its course. Within three generations that elite believes what the local population believes, is married into it, and has interests

that are local rather than imperial. It is now a functioning ruling class — but it is no longer a *transmission belt*.

Absorption is rarely the conquered defeating the conqueror. It is the conqueror's local branch discovering that ruling by conviction is cheaper than ruling by force, and taking that deal — at the metropole's expense.

Which explains a pattern that recurs across the record: the anti-absorption measures are almost always imposed from the centre, resisted or ignored at the periphery, and enacted too late. The centre has the motive and no machinery. The periphery has the machinery — its own households — and no motive.

THIRTEEN

What Would Falsify This

Predictions, offered so that the account can be tested rather than admired

An argument of this kind is worth little unless it forbids something. Four predictions follow, and each is checkable against cases not used to build it.

One. Where a conquering elite is dispersed among the conquered, marries locally, and has no institution that operates on its own children, it will be absorbed within about three generations, regardless of the prestige or antiquity of its culture. If a case is found with those conditions and no absorption, the account is wrong.

Two. Where the elite extracts from one population at a distance through intermediaries while living among a different population, it will converge on the second, not the first. The Golden Horde is the instance; other indirect-rule empires should show the same pattern, and if a case shows convergence on the population governed at arm's length rather than the one camped among, that is a serious problem for the argument.

Three. Legislation criminalising the channels of formation — intermarriage, fostering, language, dress, names — will be found at the *late* stage of a losing process, never at the start of a winning one. A power that is successfully forming its own children provides institutions instead. If a state is found prohibiting these things early and then successfully holding its elite distinct for centuries without institutional provision, the argument is in trouble.

Four. Where the ruling elite is not hereditary — where it is re-recruited from outside each generation — absorption will not occur, and the characteristic pathology will instead be succession instability. Mamluk Egypt fits. So, in its own way, does any celibate governing order.

And one honest limit. This paper has said almost nothing about the conquered population's own agency in the process, and that is a real gap rather than a considered exclusion. The Irish families who fostered Anglo-Norman children, the Persian scholars who tutored Mongol princes and the Chinese servants in Manchu households were not passive. Whether the conquered ever *pursued* this deliberately — whether anyone in any of these societies understood that raising the conqueror's children was the surest available form of resistance — is a question this account raises and does not answer.

A note on sources. This paper draws on four bodies of scholarship and no primary research of its own.

On formation and trust: the account of epistemic vigilance is from Dan Sperber and colleagues' paper of that title (*Mind & Language*, 2010); the developmental evidence on children's selective trust in informants is associated with Paul Harris and Melissa Koenig; the treatment of prestige-biased social learning follows Joseph Henrich and Francisco Gil-White, and the broader cultural-transmission framework Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson. These are summarised at the level of their general claims and the reader should go to them for the arguments and the evidence.

On Ptolemaic Egypt: population and immigration figures follow the reassessment in *Demography in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge, 2011), which estimates a total population near four million and Greek settlers near one hundred and eighty thousand, with mass immigration ending in the mid-third century BC; all such figures are contested. On the gymnasium as the institution of Greek identity, see Mario Paganini's Oxford work on gymnasia in Ptolemaic and early Roman Egypt. The double court system of *chrematistai* and *laokritai*, the royal decrees of 118 BC sorting their jurisdiction by the language of the contract, and the distinction between Greek *cleruchs* and Egyptian *machimoi* follow the standard reference literature and the Cambridge *Ancient Egyptian Economy*. Plutarch is the source for Cleopatra VII being the first of her line to learn Egyptian; he is a Greek writer of the late first and early second century AD working from earlier accounts, and the claim, though widely repeated in the scholarship, rests on him.

On Normandy: Rollo's grant and baptism of 911, and the sending of Richard to Bayeux, are recorded principally by Dudo of Saint-Quentin, writing a panegyric for the ducal house a century later, and Dudo's motives should be discounted accordingly. The sending is attested; the reason given for it is Dudo's.

On Ireland: the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366 comprise thirty-five acts in Norman French. A new critical edition and translation by Keith Busby has recently been published by the Irish Manuscripts Commission and is the place to go. The provisions cited — intermarriage, fostering, adoption, names, language, dress, manner of riding, Brehon law, exclusion of Irishmen from cathedral chapters, the ban on Irish minstrels and storytellers, and the substitution of archery for hurling — are as summarised in the standard accounts, together with the assessment that the crown never had the resources to enforce them.

On the Mongols: the divergence of the four successor states, Ghazan's conversion in 1295, the Islamization of the Golden Horde under Öz Beg from 1313, and the split of the Chagatai ulus follow the standard literature. Michal Biran's article on the

conversion of Tarmashirin Khan (1331–34) is the source for his abolition of the *yasa* and for the chronology of his fall; the sources on his reign disagree even about its dates. The claim that the Golden Horde's convergence on Islam rather than Orthodoxy discriminates between "the population ruled" and "the population lived among" is this paper's own argument and is offered to be contested.

On the Qing: Mark Elliott's *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, 2001) is the standard treatment and the source for the *guoyu qishe* doctrine, the segregated garrison quarters, the eighteenth-century decay of language and archery, and the failure of the revival policies. Pamela Crossley's work — including *Orphan Warriors* (1990) — argues that Manchu identity was substantially a construction of the state, and her disagreement with Elliott is registered here rather than resolved.

On the Mamluks: David Ayalon's studies, particularly "Mamluk Military Aristocracy: A Non-Hereditary Nobility," established the standard account of the one-generation elite renewed by import, and the status of the *awlad al-nas*. Ayalon himself qualified the non-hereditary principle considerably — noting that much of the Bahri period was in fact ruled by a dynasty, and that the non-hereditary character of the sultanate was never articulated as a policy by anyone at the time — and that qualification belongs with the claim.

The three-strategy typology, the six-condition stack, the proposition that a conquering elite converges on the population it lives among rather than the one it rules, the reading of prohibition as the instrument of a power that cannot form, and the argument that the party injured by absorption is the metropole rather than the absorbed elite, are this paper's own contributions and are offered as propositions to be tested.